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**“This Is Another Personal Question”: Research interviews and discussing sensitive issues with men with life limiting conditions**

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**Abstract:** *Undertaking research interviews can be challenging, partly because of the perceived threat to their masculinity. It has been assumed that these challenges are amplified when the discussion includes topics of a sensitive nature. Drawing on the analytic tools of Conversation Analysis (CA), this paper presents an examination of how the sensitive nature of interview questions may be co-constructed and negotiated by interviewers and interviewees alike. The data were drawn from a wider study exploring the social care needs of men with life limiting conditions. Our analysis pinpoints three distinct patterns of talk delivered by the interviewers where the sensitivity of the topic is foregrounded, and illuminates the consequences of these patterns of talk.*

**Keywords:** *conversation analysis, research interviews, sensitive topics*

Undertaking qualitative research interviews is thought by some to provide some specific challenges to male interviewees. These include how men negotiate power in interviews, how they do or do not perform gender and masculinity, and how amenable they are to talking about themselves, their feelings and/or so called ‘sensitive topics’ (Olliffe & Mroz, 2005; Schwalbe & Walkomir, 2001; van den Hoonaard, 2009; Jachyra et al., 2014). Authors have made suggestions for how to best encourage men to engage in an interview setting and Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) for example describe how in circumstances where a man is the respondent, the research interview is both a place of threat and opportunity. As they put it, the interview environment is a place where men can portray themselves as powerful, in control, autonomous and rational, but it is also threatening not least because the interviewer controls the interaction. Where the topic area for discussion is one that might be viewed as sensitive, the challenges for an interviewer to keep the interview on track may be amplified (Roulston et al, 2003), and the researcher may have additional work to ensure they do not alienate the respondent. In his guide to the ‘art’ of qualitative interviewing, Weiss (1994) provides very general guidance for handling difficult questions. He describes the importance of developing a *reliable research relationship before entering the area* (1994: 76).

It is not always clear on what evidence much of the guidance about how to undertake research interviews is based. Recently, attention has turned to the way the roles in research interviews are accomplished, starting from the premise that interviews are interactional and relational encounters (Abbott, 2012; Birch & Millar, 2000; Kitzinger, 2004; Smart, 2009):

*...whatever is produced in an actual interview has to be viewed as a product of interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee* (Suoninen and Jokinen, 2005)

In these interactional encounters it is suggested by some writers that male interviewees may try to regain and retain control of the interview for the reasons outlined above (Olliffe & Mroz 2005). This assertion however maybe based on a set of assumptions about the characteristics and social positioning of the interviewee in relation to the interviewer. In our field of work – disability studies – disabled men have historically been constructed as gender-less with gender presented as a troubling and troublesome variable (Shakespeare, 1999; Zitzelberger, 2005). Wilson, Parmenter, Stancliffe and Shuttleworth's (2013) work suggested that many disabled men have been seen as 'conditionally masculine' i.e. that the nature of the impaired body or mind means that disabled men will always be less than wholly male or wholly masculine as compared to non-disabled men. The barriers faced by disabled men create a 'reliant masculinity' which stresses powerlessness and stigma and which is in stark contrast to a 'hegemonic masculinity', Connell's (1995) seminal term for a privileged, dominant and idealised masculinity predicated on traits such as physical power, autonomy and dominance. Wilson (2013) argued that for disabled men whose masculinity is often seen as diminished, it reflects the inherent inequality of reliance upon care-giving relationships in order to be or perform masculinity. So it maybe that some men in research interviews are more or less able to exert or take control from an interviewer who, if non-disabled, may be seen as inherently more powerful.

Research interviews are ordinarily private encounters and in much work the data is sliced and presented so thinly that it would be very hard to see power and interaction in action. Some forms of data collection and analysis lend themselves to a more transparent showing of the encounter and one of these is conversation analysis (CA) in which the talk that is created by both parties is shown and analysed – for what is said, not said and how things are said/not said. CA provides the tools for exploring the way in which talk and how it arises tells us something useful about the interaction in which the talk is taking place. It does this through a fine-grained analysis of sequences of talk. It inevitably scrutinises the talk of both the interviewer and the interviewee and underpins this paper in which we recognise as Broom, Hand and Tovey (2009 do, that:

Interviewer responses may be highly influential in shaping where the 'story' goes and the boundaries imposed on the participant's account. (p.62)

This paper uses CA to look at a subset of data collected in research interviews with disabled men and in particular to look at talk which dealt with 'sensitive topics'. It will suggest that CA is one useful tool in exploring how to understand the success or failure of the research encounter to elicit data about so called sensitive topics and to look in more detail at the performance of identity and gender in research interviews.

The interview data was collected as part of an English study about the experiences of disabled men with a long-term health condition: Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD). DMD is an inherited neuromuscular disease which affects males (in about 1 in every 3500 UK births.) Boys with DMD generally lose the ability to walk independently by the age of 13, and as they get older there are other complications: curvature of the spine, respiratory difficulties and cardiac failure. The mean age of death without specialised treatment was 19 but during the last few years there have been significant improvements in the ways DMD is

managed. In particular, teenagers who have been using nocturnal home ventilation to support their breathing can expect to live to around 27 years (Eagle et al. 2007). Recent research in the UK and Canada (Author refs) suggests that the social and psychological support needs of men with DMD are poorly served, with the continuing focus upon medical needs as opposed to wider needs such as access to work, good quality support, independent living, social and leisure activities, emotional support and opportunities to develop sexual relationships. Studies by (Author refs) found that once further or higher education had been completed, men with DMD were likely to be living at home, without a great deal of day time activity, with very limited social opportunities, and often dependent on family members for physical support and care – a series of barriers not likely to reinforce a strong sense of emerging manhood or masculinity (Author ref). Additionally, a previous interview based study with this client group in Canada noted that discussions about relationships were either absent and or troublesome in the research context:

*“Few participants spoke about intimate relationships and most seemed uncomfortable when the topic was raised”* (Gibson et al, 2013: 13)

The study took place between 2012 and 2014 and was a partnership between the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, Jon Hastie (a researcher, film maker and disability activist living with DMD) and the Duchenne Family Support Group (a charity run by those affected by DMD for people affected by DMD in the UK). It was funded by the NIHR School for Social Care Research and ethical approval for the study was obtained from the NIHR Social Care Research Ethics Committee. The overarching goal of the study (reported in Abbot, Jepson and Hastie 2015) was to understand more about the intersection of male gender and long-term conditions and to see how social care practice in this area could be improved.

## METHOD

Men with DMD were recruited to the study with the support of our partner organisation via muscular dystrophy related Facebook pages. Potential participants were sent an information sheet about the research and we took the step of sending our semi-structured interview schedule in advance to those who were interested in taking part so that they could make a more informed decision about what the interview would cover. The interview schedule was drawn up in the light of an initial literature review and following discussion between the researchers and our partner organisation. It was piloted with two men with DMD and these pilot interviews were immediately transcribed so that we could review them and consider the changes we wanted to make to the schedule for subsequent interviews. In total, 20 men with DMD were recruited to the study. They came from a range of geographical locations across England including both urban and rural settings. They ranged in age from 21 to 33; 17 were white British; 1 participant was married with children; 1 identified as a gay man; 1 had a label of intellectual disabilities.

Interview topics based were based around domains of manhood: work, physical changes to the body, sex and intimate relationships, social care support and living arrangements. Interviews were facilitated by two researchers (R1 and R2) over a 12 month period, in the homes of the interviewees (with the exception of the 2 Skype interviews). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, after first gaining consent from participants. Interviews lasted between 36 and 106 minutes, with a mean duration of 65 minutes. Participants were given a £20 gift voucher in recognition of their time and contribution to the study.

The analytic approach reported in this paper draws on the tools of Conversation Analysis (CA). We looked at how participants in the interviews designed their turns of talk, and considered how the interactions progressed. Whilst an underpinning principle of CA is that the analyst's focus should be upon naturally occurring data (ten Have, 2007), it has also been successfully used to illuminate patterns of talk in research interviews (Roulston, 2006). In keeping with principles of CA (Sidnell, 2013), the beginning point in the analytic process here came from repeated listenings to the audio recordings. From these initial observations we noticed patterns of talk particular to the 'sex and intimate relationships' sections of the interviews. Specifically, these sections of interviews appeared to be more 'problematic' than the others. We had anticipated that this would be an important topic given that in the later stages of the condition, men with Duchenne would likely need physical assistance to have sex with others or to masturbate and may face a range of potential barriers in finding such support as well as sexual partners. In a discussion at a team meeting to discuss the two pilot interviews, the (not inexperienced) interviewers acknowledged that they were finding the sex and relationship section to be the most challenging to ask about. Thereafter, a more detailed screening of the 'sex' sections of the verbatim transcribed interviews was undertaken, alongside further listenings to the audio recordings of these parts of the interview. The first author then improved the verbatim transcripts using conversation analytic transcription conventions to represent details such as overlapping talk, pauses between turns and aspects of speech delivery, such as changes of pitch or emphasis (Hepburn & Bolden, 2013). Thereafter, having built a collection of examples of the phenomenon (namely the researchers asking questions about sex and relationships), we undertook a line by line analysis of these sequences of talk, paying particular attention to places where there was apparent evidence of interactional trouble and how these sequences of talk progressed.

The focus of this paper is on how interviewers and interviewees negotiated the potentially tricky area of discussions about intimate sexual relationships. Using detailed excerpts from the interviews we will demonstrate how the 'sensitivity' of the topic is projected by the interviewers – both explicitly and implicitly and also consider how interview respondents reacted to these projections. Finally, we will consider the implications for researchers undertaking interview based studies with men where the topic area may be one with some sensitivity attached to it.

## **INTERVIEWERS' APPROACHES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

### **What Made A Question A Sensitive Question?**

Whilst initial suppositions suggested that the topic of sex was a sensitive one for either (or both) the interviewers and interviewees, we were interested in probing the data more deeply to see what evidence existed that supported (or confounded) that supposition.

Excerpt 1 comes nearly 52 minutes into an interview, and follows 7 minutes of discussion about relationships with other people. In the section preceding this excerpt the respondent who lived in a residential care home talked about his lack of experience of a sexual relationship with another person, and he and the interviewer had discussed filmic representations of people with disabilities, and how their relationships with other people were depicted.

Excerpt 1 - R1-P7<sup>1</sup>(04) 51.58

- 01 R1: and (.) erm again this is another personal question  
02 but in te- are you: erm- are you able to have sex with  
03 yourself in terms of (.) like masturbation is that  
04 something that your: (.) [hands] will allow or not  
05 P7: [mmm]  
06 P7: er (heh) okay um (0.4) .pt (0.2) alright um hhh alright um  
07 (2.5) well um (2.0) okay um (1.6) (give me s-) well i-  
08 well I was able to at one point (0.5) well I still can  
09 (*unclear*)(0.5) but it's only when I'm 'here' in the bed  
10 R2: hmm  
11 P7: that's the only time I can (0.5) which yeah (1.2) yeah  
12 but I kind of (didn't like-) gave up go- doing (.)  
13 that a while ago 'cos I have (0.2) night staff in  
14 (0.4) it's (felt) a little bit uncomfortable that's why

The interviewer begins his turn at talk with the discourse marking 'and' – study of conversation has demonstrated that beginning a question in this way indicates that the speaker is linking the topic to a preceding section (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994). Immediately, we see how R1 then projects the (apparent) sensitivity of the topic onto the interviewee, by prefacing what is to come as a *personal question*, which may have the effect of making the interviewee aware of the nature of what is to come. The construction of R1's question in lines 2-3 is punctuated with self-initiated repair. In CA terms, this is an instance where '*a current speaker interrupts ...their talk...to fix some possible trouble...*' (Kitzinger, 2013). In this excerpt the repair takes the form of two false starts '*in te-*' and '*are you, erm*' before R1 settles on the final formulation of '*are you able to have sex with yourself*'. These repairs suggest that the terminology of the question is being formulated as he goes, rather than for instance by following a topic guide verbatim. The interviewer completes his turn by formulating a question about the respondent's ability to masturbate. In their analysis of patterns of talk in HIV/AIDS counselling sessions, Silverman and Perakyla (1990) described evidence of 'turbulence' in the talk in sequences leading up to the 'delicate' aspects of the interactions. Specifically, they highlighted that these turns were punctuated with pauses, hesitations and repair. These observations were similarly evident in this, and subsequent, extracts from interviews in the current study.

In his response, from line 6, we see evidence that suggests there is some interactional trouble for the respondent here. His turn is punctuated by laughter particles (the 'heh' transcribed in line 6) which can be indicative of problems and/or the anxieties about the appropriateness of what has been said (Potter and Hepburn, 2010), there are long pauses in his turn which suggests a problem in formulating a response. However, ultimately we do get to a place where the respondent answers R1's question: we find out not only about his current ability to masturbate, but also he provides further information about the problems associated with doing so in his current living environment, specifically that it feels 'uncomfortable' because with the night staff in. Subsequently, the researcher probed on this topic area and was able to identify a particular area of concern that negatively affected the social care of this man. Close scrutiny of this extract has shown us that whilst this respondent may initially struggle

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve anonymity, in this, and subsequent excerpts, researchers' are referred to as R and respondents as P.

over their response to a topic constructed as personal, given time, the question did still elicit a useful and evidently frank response.

A second example comes from an interview conducted by R2. This excerpt comes 39 minutes into the interview, and similar to the previous example, immediately prior to this topic has been a discussion about sex with other people.

Excerpt 2 - R2 - P1 (2) 39:16

- 01 R2: okay alright um finally um- no not quite finally on  
02 this section but um- (1.5) °penultimately° erm (1.0)  
03 there's even th- even more question (0.6) more ma-  
04 personal question of (0.2) well having sex with  
05 yourself if you understand what I mean by that  
06 (0.5)  
07 P1: wanking

We again see hesitancy from the interviewer here, with the slightly clumsy construction of an announcement that we are close to the end of this section (perhaps this is something that the interviewer anticipates the interviewee welcoming?). Here R2 upgrades the personal nature of the question; it is set up as being '*even more*' personal than what has come before. The interviewer, perhaps acknowledging that his description of '*having sex with yourself*' is not wholly specific, checks the respondent's understanding. After a brief pause, we see the respondent evidently *not* struggling with the personal nature of the question, and clearly demonstrating that he does understand what R2 '*means by that*'.

From these examples, it is perhaps inconclusive what effect stating the personal nature of the question has. Maybe this is simply something that the interviewers felt it necessary to declare. It could be argued that all of the questions in the interviews were personal. The topic guide was based around the personal lives of the respondent, and they were expected to speak about 'intimate' aspects of their life throughout.

### **Offering The Respondent An Opt Out**

A second interactional strategy evident in the interviewers' approach that apparently displayed the potential delicacy of their questions was offering respondents an option to opt out of answering a question. Once more, we have two examples to illustrate this point. Excerpt 3 comes 90 minutes into interview R2-P2. We see the interviewer explicitly projecting the possible sensitivity of what is to come, using somewhat formal language in the context of what has gone before.

Excerpt 3 - R2 - 02 (2) 92:49

- 01 R2: yeah cool good erm. and one thing erm we didn't  
02 really cover erm- (0.2) mentioned relationships  
03 earlier but didn't really mention sex – and er (0.5) I  
04 will remind you you don't have to answer any  
05 quest(hh)ions you don't want (hh)to

Perhaps acknowledging the stark contrast into a formal use of speech in line 05, the interviewer punctuates his turn with audible laughter *in* his voice, what Potter and Hepburn (2010) refer to as *interpolated particles of aspiration* or *IPAs* (p.3). They suggest that IPAs can be used to mark a problem within the turn, and specifically (as in this case) that: *the*

*speaker [of the IPA] displays that they have problems with [what they have said]* (p.19), and we might reasonably assume therefore, that R2 here has projected a ‘problem’ with the formality of what he has said.

A second example of an interviewer offering the respondent the chance to not answer a question came in interview R2 01, immediately after the section described in excerpt 2. The last line from excerpt 2 is included here:

Excerpt 4 - R2 - P1 (2) 39:33

- 07 R2: wanking.  
08 P1: yes exactly wanking so (0.2) i- i- is that  
09 something that you can do or would want to do  
10 (1.8)  
11 R2: if you're happy you don't have to answer that  
12 que[stion]  
13 P1: [it's ] it's not something I can really do (0.5)  
14 R2: ye[ah  
15 P1: [not any more

After confirming the accuracy of the interviewee's interpretation of what R2 ‘meant by that’, R2 continues by formulating a 2-part question, asking whether ‘*wanking*’ is something the interviewee ‘*can*’ or ‘*would want to do*’. We know from conversation analytic studies that where a long pause follows a question it may well be an indicator of interactional trouble (Pomerantz, 1984). Here, R2 evidently interprets the long pause in line 9 as indicative of ‘trouble’ and, adheres to expected rules of turn taking (Sacks 1974) whereby if a recipient does not take their turn, then the initial speaker may do so. The way that R2 constructs his next turn, and the subsequent progression of the sequence of talk is interesting. We might have expected a reformulation of the initial question, but instead, we see R2 offering the respondent an opt out, albeit an apparently conditional one – i.e. the interviewee does not have to answer the question if he is ‘*happy*’ – although we cannot tell with what. However, the work that offering an opt out does here is to actually prompt the interviewee to respond to the initial question - related to the first prong of the question (i.e. it relates to ‘ability’ rather than ‘desire’). In these instances, whilst the interviewer apparently provides the opportunity to put off responding, it in fact triggered the interviewee to provide a response.

### **Announcing A Topic And Seeking Permission**

The next phenomenon we were interested in was the interviewers ‘announcing’ what was coming next. This was a relatively common opening gambit to denote a shift to a new topic, and was used in different sections of the interviews. Two typical examples follow:

Excerpt 5 - R2-P6 (01)

- 01 R2: right. (0.2) al:right the next one is about kind of having  
02 a car and owning a car

Excerpt 6 - R2-P5 (02)

- 01 R2: cool. (.) and the next area I want to talk about is relationships

In excerpt 5 the interviewer has marked the end of the preceding passage of talk by saying “right”, the transcribed full-stop denotes a downward inflection, indicative of a completion of



a turn. After a brief pause R2 announces what the next stage of the interview will be about. Excerpt 6 follows an almost identical pattern, this time receiving the preceding answer from the interviewee as ‘acceptable’ by saying *cool* – again note the transcribed downward inflection, the presence of a brief pause, and the announcement of what is to follow. There are two examples of this phenomenon from the ‘sex’ sections that we intend to look at in more detail. First, this excerpt from R1’s interview 01.

Excerpt 7 - R1 – P1 - 7-01 (1) 32.07

- 01 R1: thank you (0.6) so erm (.) I wanted to ask you  
 02 about sex  
 03 P1: [.hh  
 04 R1: [I don't know how you feel about me asking you  
 05 about that?  
 06 P1: .hhh (0.6) well I've not (0.6) really had any (0.4)  
 07 experiences or: (0.2) like relationships (0.8) with  
 08 girls so (1.2) I think as a man it's- (1.4) I think  
 09 ye- (0.6) it's more growing up it's like- (0.5) I  
 10 don't think it's nn-necessarily for me (.) but I do  
 11 think society and (humanity is) necessary (.) but .hhh  
 12 (0.2) but that's kind of what (0.4) an adult is (0.4)  
 13 like your relationship changes (0.2) you need to  
 14 advance but (1.0) other people advance in a different  
 15 way to me, I think. I think it's (all mostly) like  
 16 (1.0) a not a choi- like a choice (0.4) (that) I don't  
 17 n-need (0.2) I-I can just have like friendships (0.6)  
 18 I think it's more you (.) have to adapt to:(0.4)  
 19 differences  
 20 (1.0)  
 21 P1: yeah

There are obvious similarities in the construction of the announcement in line 1 and 2 with those scene in the preceding examples: the interviewer receives a previous response (*thank you*); there is a short pause before beginning the next topic; and there follows an announcement of what the next topic is about (in this cases ‘sex’). In the turn following this topic initiating announcement interviewer R2 asks a fairly open question (line 4), that is not one that is answerable with a yes/no. Because of this, he is not explicitly seeking permission to ahead, but we would argue, he is gauging the lay of the land.- a common trait of a pre-sequence of talk (Schegloff, 2007). Typically, where a pre-sequence question is placed, it is designed to seek a go-ahead. Hence, in this extract, if we were to hear a response, we might reasonably expect something akin to ‘I feel ok about you asking me’, but in fact, we see a quite awkward answer (note the turn is punctuated with pauses and false starts, all indicative of some sort of interactional ‘trouble’) to a question, as yet unasked. We might speculate at this point that the interactional work being done by P1 here is to divert the necessity of answering a question (as yet unasked) and to save face. Although not reproduced here, the next steps in this sequence, after this extract, are punctuated with ‘repair’ turns with both R1 and the respondent seeking more information / checking what the other has said. We will now turn our attention to look at a second, contrasting example of a permission seeking turn. This example takes place 34 minutes into R2’s interview 01.

Excerpt 8 - R2-01 (1) 34.05

01 R2: okay (0.2) so errm (0.5) the next one is (1.0) well it's  
 02 about sex basically[s o] (0.4) do you mind me asking  
 03 R2: [hmm]  
 04 P1: you (.) about (.) about sex?  
 05 R2: (0.4) nah  
 06 P1: no↑(.) so okay so I mean yeah for many people that's  
 07 (.) an important part about (0.4) being a man (0.2)  
 08 but errm °obviously with Duchenne° there are (.)  
 09 <additional challenges> (.) in that kind of area so:  
 10 R2: yeah  
 11 P1: you know how important is it (.) is it to you um-  
 12 you know to have experiences of that (0.2) of a  
 13 sexual nature?  
 14 (1.5)  
 15 R2: well I think it's probably what (.) everyone wants  
 16 really isn't it  
 17 P1: mmhmm  
 18 (3.0)  
 19 R2: I haven't had any luck so far  
 20 P1: really? no? (0.2) er- it oh- it's something that you  
 21 would like though  
 22 (1.6)  
 23 R2: °ye:ah°

Once more, after the receipt of the previous answer, we see R2 announcing what it to come next. In contrast to the previous example, in this instance the permission seeking is done in the form of a direct Yes/No question. '*Do you mind me asking you about sex*' (line 2-4). This type of closed-question shape 'prefers' a 'no' answer (i.e. no, I don't mind'), which the respondent duly provides. This more normal pattern of sequence progression thus opens the floor for interviewer R2 to go ahead with the next question in lines 6-13. In line 14, after R2's question is complete (not the upward inflection after the words '*sexual nature*'), there is a long pause before the answer, which may be indicative of interactional trouble. However, rather than reformulating his question, or prompting the respondent, R2 allows this pause to remain, and subsequently receives an answer. If the interview were to continue to follow expected the three-step interview structure it would be appropriate for R2 here to receive and/or evaluate this response, and then move to the next question. However, we only see a minimal acknowledgment token (Jefferson, 1984) in the form of a protracted '*mmhmm*' sound. Here, the consequence of the non-issue of a follow up question is for the respondent to hear their answer as incomplete, and his response to this is to say more by way of qualification (and personalisation) of his preceding answer.

From these two examples, we have seen three things of note. Firstly, that asking a respondent's permission to ask a question was unique to the sections of the interview that the researchers' evidently viewed as sensitive. Secondly, that when asking permission, doing so with a closed 'yes/no' formed question shape was less problematic in terms of the progression of the sequence than by asking a more abstract question. A recommendation from Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) for addressing '*emotionally loaded topics*' is to not immediately try to probe if a respondent is hesitant to say more. Their advice is to move on, but to circle back to the topic later. However, the third and final point we have made here may challenge this assertion. In fact, we saw that by leaving a space after receiving an answer

which might have been viewed as adequate the interviewees recognised this as a place where they might be expected to provide more information.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have seen evidence of interviewers demonstrating their difficulty in asking questions about sex and sexual relationships with men with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. These difficulties were seen in several places. Firstly, interviewers declared the personal nature of the question, although this tactic in itself did not apparently have any significant consequences on the subsequent response from the interviewees, hence we might speculate that its action may have simply been that of a ‘placeholder’ issued by interviewers to mark their reading of what was to come. Secondly, interviewers provided respondents with the opportunity to opt-out of certain questions, and we saw that a consequence of this could be to act as a prompt to the interviewee to deliver a response to the initial question. Thirdly, we saw interviewers prefacing the topic area and within this preface, seeking ‘permission’ from the respondent to continue. In doing so, we noted that interviewees may not grasp the interviewer’s motive for seeking permission, and where the permission was sought with an open question it disrupted the flow of the interview. By contrast, a closed, yes/no permission-seeking question enabled the interview to progress without disruption.

Each of these three patterns of talk were unique to the sections of the interviews that discussed sex and sexual relationships. By examining more closely the patterns of talk in these parts of the interviews we also saw evidence of both parties orienting to the delicacy of the task at hand. As mentioned, these orientations align closely with conversation analytic work in HIV/AIDS counselling sessions (Silverman and Perakly, 1990). Our analysis indicates that both interactional parties - the interviewer and interviewee - were aware of the potential sensitivities of the topic area, and yet were able to provide responses that meant the interviews were completed.

This approach is slightly unusual in that it turns the lens onto the work of the researcher and what they do, how they ask questions, shapes the types of responses elicited. It aligns, therefore with Rapley’s (2001) assertion of the importance of ensuring that the ‘*local context of data production*’ – that is, the way in which questions are asked - is ‘*central to analyzing interview data*’. A useful contribution of CA may be as a means of exploring the approaches assumed to be effective in undertaking research interviews. For example, Kvale (1996) suggests that leaving a pause in a research interview is a strategy that the good interviewer should use as a means of encouraging a respondent to say more. In the later examples in this study, we have seen this actually being played out in an interview. The tools of CA – in particular as a means of transcribing interaction – are helpful here therefore as a means of assessing the efficacy of this strategy. As Rapley (2001) noted, by transcribing interviews using CA notation, we: ‘*see them as spaces of finely co-ordinated interactional work in which the talk of both speakers is central to producing the interview*’ (2001: 306). This close analysis of the details of the interaction would appear, therefore, to support the notion that leaving space can be a useful strategy.

Having analysed research interview data using CA methods, Roulston (2011) was able to identify questions that respondents found “sensitive”. In keeping with the current study, those sequences were: *replete with repairs, pauses, restarts, and clarification questions* (2011, 357). She recommended that researchers may consider reformulating those questions for later stages of data collection. The later examples presented in this paper suggest that it may not

always be necessary to reformulate questions that are demonstrably interpreted as sensitive. We saw that in fact, leaving a pause longer than might be expected, actually provided a space for respondents to deliver a fuller answer than they had previously. However the interviewers did in fact learn from analysis of pilot interviews that they were projecting their own anxiety onto interviewees and undertook to ask questions about sex and masturbation in a clearer and less loaded way. We also think we were helped in coproducing ‘good’ data by the fact that we had sent the interview schedule to interviewees in advance (as advocated by Oliffe & Mroz 2005) to flag up so called ‘sensitive questions’ and to give interviewees an opportunity to reflect on what we thought was quite a difficult set of questions about male identity. A number of interviewees specifically mentioned how useful this had been including this man who was asked if he had found it helpful to have the interview schedule sent in advance:

*I think it was helpful. Because when I read it, and the past few days, I've been kind of thinking about it. Because this is quite a difficult subject. If, like, you just came, you didn't give us the questions, and you asked all these questions, you're thinking, 'Oh my god, this is too much.' But this prepared you a bit, so you don't feel as nervous.*

The quality of ‘sensitive talk’ that the interviews actually produced reminds us as Oliffe and Mroz (2005) do, that we should not assume that men do want to talk and engage in interviews. Nor should we necessarily assume that interviewees either want or indeed can perform in unconditionally masculine ways in interviews as Walby (2010, 654) reminds us:

*Whilst we can assume that interviews provide an opportunity for both the researcher and the respondent to fashion a sense of self through their talk and gestures, we should not assume that men are always in pursuit of hegemonic masculinity.*

Schwalbe & Wolkomir (2001, 96) highlight that the ‘identity work’ men do in interviews should not be erased and discounted as not the ‘real data’:

*Researchers interested in men's emotions must pay attention not only to what men say in interviews but to how they say it and what they do.*

We would add and conclude that conversation analysis is a useful tool in examining the coproduction of that ‘identity work’ and can serve a useful purpose in understanding men’s positioning in research.

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